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ABSTRACT

An analysis of four writers' portrayals of nineteenth and early twentieth century working class life reveals a progression of political thought about the treatment of people's struggles to effectively change society. In Dickens' "Hard Times" (1854), the protagonist is a martyr-saint who finds solace in subduing his anger and continuing to bear the oppression of his class. In "Felix Holt, the Radical" (1866), George Eliot's protagonists represent her contempt for the uselessness of the upper classes and belief that change must occur. The author does not demand the elimination of poverty to improve society. The ruling class's behavior is to be emulated, not their acquisition of material goods. In "The Nether World" of George Gissing (1889), disease, filth, and chaos intensify the constant and utterly inescapable tension of scrounging for money to buy food and fuel. Death is an anticipated release. Robert Tressall's protagonist in "The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropist" allows the authors to present the values of socialism in the reality of the workers' world, which validates the need for dramatic social change. The views that these authors present about the exemplary worker range from saintly, accepting martyr; conservative Radical moralist; resigned, nihilistic artist-artisan; to rational, socialist teacher-activist. The authors write during a period when there is no question as to the moral, instructive, humanizing function of literature. Teachers need to demonstrate these political implications of literature to students so their reading and overall learning become more fully conscious processes. (HTH)

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Four Writers' Views of the English Working Class: The Significance of the Novel in Creating Reality

by

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William Lovett, a self-taught leader of the moral-force Chartists, recalls the exhileration he discovered when he became alive intellectually, which is not unlike the feeling many persons have who must struggle to be able to learn: "Awakened to a new mental existence, new feelings, hopes, and aspirations sprang up within me, and every spare moment was devoted to the acquisition of some kind of useful knowledge." The monotony, loneliness, and isolation of industrial city life demanded relief in some form of relazing, non harmful, non costly exercise of the mind. Confronted with dim lights, constant noise, and extreme tiredness at the end of the day, workers still read in the nineteenth century. It is this insatiable human drive and will to persevere in learning that opens the vista to new meanings and new interpretations of reality for people.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine four writers' portrayals of nineteenth and early twentieth century working-class life in specific novels published between 1850 and 1915 and to compare the outcome of what they present as reality. A study of Charles Dickens' Hard Times (1854), George Eliot's Felix Holt, the Radical (1866), George Gissing's The Nether World (1889), and Robert Tressall's The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists (1914) will show a movement from allegorical symbolism, moral representation, nihilistic fatalism, to realistic activism. This change represents trends in feeling tone during different periods, to a degree, but also reveals a progression of political thought about the treatment of the struggles of people and of their problems in uniting to effectively change the society. This discussion considers each author's view of the characteristics of working-class people and the relationships that are fostered in an environment of constant, hard, long work, of the relationship that exists between the ruling and working classes, and of the types of change that are possible and how they can come about.

In Hard Times, his most widely-reputed working-class novel, Dickens actually uses only one-fourth of the chapters to present the lives and problems of the working class. Existing in a desolate world of mills where owners declare that "smoke [is] meat and drink to us; it's the healthiest thing in the world in all respects, and particularly for the lungs," workers, as will be seen in Gissing's text also, can only hope for and look forward to death for relief from their personal, social, and economic miseries. Self-restrained, stooped, forty-year old, power-loom weaver Stephen Blackpool is Dickens' example of the "good" working man. Debased and burdeded by a returning, drunken wife, shunned by fellow workers who do not understand why he believes the Combination will only bring them trouble, this martyr-saint protagonist finds solace in subduing his

anger and continuing to bear the oppression of the "muddle" that he identifies as the condition of his class, "numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin,' aw the same one way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves." He knows there is no need for the physical and emotional deaths that the workplace, symbolized by the Old Hell Shaft which claims his life, demands. His persistent, though self-destructive commitment to his individual conclusions, contributes to the continued exploitation of the poor, reinforcing the efforts of an inherently evil system where "incapable or sordid hands . . . interpose between [the world] and the things [that would seek] to bless" it. Though undeserving of the blows he receives, Stephen almost stupidly accepts pain that cannot be escaped.

Dickens definitely shows a division of people in Hard Times, but he identifies and remains with the middle class even when he shows that the treatment of the poor by the upper classes is often irresponsible. Though Stephen remains "faithful to his class," Dickens shows him rightfully going to the ruling class for answers to questions he cannot solve. Haunted by his marriage and wanting to spend his life with Rachel, a respectable working-class woman, he pleads with Bounderby to identify a way for him to get a divorce, but learns he simply cannot. The cost is too high. After being fired, he follows Tom Gradgrind's suggestion to hang around the bank in case Tom can get him a job, while in reality this makes him look like the perpetrator of the robbery that Tom commits. Even as he is dying, Stephen looks to the gentleman, the senior Gradgrind, to clear his name of the crime. Though this is Tom's father, Stephen believes he will carry out the responsibility. And he does.

It is the potential power of the masses that is threatening. As P. J. Keating declares, in The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction, "the real danger lay in the possibility of the workers consolidating their position by mass adherence to any social philosophy which tended to accentuate class differences." For Dickens, the safe, non disruptive answer in the end is the "kindness and patience an' cheery ways, that so draws nigh to one another in their monny troubles" which is what the hero, Stephen, believes is the impetus for good works. Sketches of individual change end the story, though there are no reasons for why they occur. People remain an abstraction in the sense of what they are and how they can really change. Dickens is very clear, however, in his portrayal of his symbolic worker, Stephen, the separation of classes, and his resolution of problems with simple, positive emotions.

George Eliot presents a more sophisticated, complex world in Felix Holt, the Radical in which she sees the working class as the group with more probability of possessing the "fellow feeling" necessary for making society into a cohesive, unified whole. She depicts the milieu as a historical continuum, moving an old coachman from the countryside to the manufacturing towns as the story begins in 1831. In general, the small towns still exist near enough to the field and open spaces where people can walk and "feel less unhappy . . . in the [sunny] late autumn afternoons," although the coal-pits turn time upside down for"powerful men walking queerly with knees bent outward, . . . going home to throw themselves down . . . and sleep through the daylight." While Eliot devotes approximately half of the chapters in the text to discussion of working-class life, the reader does not get a sense of Felix' work or the everyday struggle that he and others experience, since the focus is on an exceptional workingman's interactions and political activity. Supportive of controlled change during the impending reform movement of 1831 (and 1867 when the text is written), Eliot advocates a brave, courageous vital approach, at times "even some vain effort [which] would satisfy . . . better than more gazing."

With contempt for the uselessness of the upper classes and yet a belief that change must occur by "right remedies and right methods," Felix represents Eliot's moral social view and genuine desire for an orderly passage of "the inheritance . . . of the common estate of society," of culture, to all people. Rugged, insightful, strong, Felix refuses to enter any trade that requires him to "prop up my chin with a high cravat," a collar being a distinguishing mark between classes. Determined to not make the world worse because of his existence, Felix demonstrates an unusual brand of Radicalism, as Eliot takes the opportunity with her admirable hero to re-define what responsible reform and behavior should be. Not only does he teach young boys a trade and encourage the miners to set up a school for their children, but he challenges the speakers who say that universal suffrage and an annually-elected parliament will make things better for the working class. Encouraging the people in their "heavy responsibility . . . to know that as a body we are neither very wise nor very virtuous," Felix states, in his Address to the Workingmen, that each class should be used to work to its highest level of achievement and thus contribute all it can to society's development. He continues to declare the need for all classes working together, while he knows the aristrocracy tries to bribe the miners during the election with rhetoric and liquor. The education that he wants workers to get comes into serious question, then, since the teachers would come with ruling-class ideas.

Eliot stresses the separation between classes but focusses on the natural causes of the situation instead of the economic causes for it. Eliot shows how money destroys people. This is a fear that Felix speaks of when he says he wishes to remain with his own class. He believes that is the right thing to do, but he is also fearful that if he ever tries to succeed in the system, it would completely override him, for he would aggressively try to win. Eliot's version of human goodness relies heavily on individual, intellectual change. She weaves together more elements of the society in arriving at her moral statement of how the process of change should proceed. Yet, in some respects she is just as conservative as Dickens in her political stance. Not only does she advocate leaving material reality untouched, she does not even indicate that there is a desire or need for a better life in the working class. Whatever the master gives is what should be received. Felix' answer is to have as little contact as possible with the bosses and to lead a simple life. He does that eventually; he is happy with his French teacher-wife and child. Eliot does not demand the elimination of poverty to improve society. She wants the working class to want less and to act refined. The ruling class' behavior is to be emulated, not their acquisition of material possessions.

The world that Gissing creates in The Nether World consists entirely of the lives of workers in a confined, intricate, inescapable web. This is different from the two previously discussed novels. Some critics claim the author rivals Zola for the power of expression in the naturalist mode, for the destitution and depravity that abject poverty causes and maintains. There is absolutely no way out of the savagery that the environment breeds. No one can get to another level in society and permanently remain there. There are no strategies which will eliminate the bitterness, competition, and distortion in this pit of hell, which demands continuous human sacrifice. Repeated images of death, dungeons, slavery, and torture reveal the horror of the penetrating, driving, cold darkness of the underworld.

This is the world of the workers, of the poor, although the reader does not see as much of the workplace as in Tressall's text. Here there is not much available work to see. Gissing presents the ongoing, intermeshed lives and dramas of the people and the consequences of trying to be better than what the environment will allow. The social world differs from that in Felix Holt, because in Clerkenwell Green the people cannot withdraw into themselves. There are no resources and no supporting natural environment to encourage life, even if it is poor. Disease, filth, and chaos intensify the constant tension of scrounging

for money to buy food and fuel. The insecurity of always having to go to the pawnbroker makes any seeming gain futile. In fact, death is not only the final release but an anticipated event, even for infants.

Gissing shows a series of working-class men and women, revealing the effects of poverty in various behaviors. Sidney Kirkwood, a jewellery artisan, the protagonist, fuctions as guide and teacher, like Felix. But he is also an artist, and it is his interest in sketching which he tries to escape into. In contrast to Sidney, Gissing presents John Hewett, an honorable, hard-working "wilful" man with "fancies" that influence "his ideas of decency." Emotional and often uncontrolled with anger and frustration, he tries all the methods that he can use to get a job. For example, he dyes his hair so he will not look his age, fifty-six, for "when there's twice too many of us for the work that's to be done, . . . [they make] the old uns . . . give way. . . . Let 'em beg; let 'em starve!" The reader gets the full impact of 500 persons going to apply for a job when there is one opening the resulting anger and hostility that every man feels when he is made to compete with others for it.

The fact that the workers exist in a separate, lower-level world shows the reality of the conflict between the classes. The working class knows that the rich see them existing only to meet their needs, whether that be the desire for psychological control or just more luxury. Hewett says he will not apply for a job at Corder's for "you [must] make yourself small before him, an' say 'sir' . . . and keep tellin' him as he's your Providence on earth, . . . an' [then] he'll keep you on the job."

No one escapes in the nether world. Nature determines the outcome, and it is clear what results from the environment. People join together temporarily when they are in need, but no group gives leadership to increasing the political knowledge of the people. Violence exists, not to take power away from the ruling class, but as an outlet for anger, turning inward on the workers themselves. Gissing's desperate, cynical novel shows the working class entrapped by the environment, economics, low self-esteem, and social expectations. Influenced by society and their expectations of themselves, Eliot's characters in Felix Holt may make the wrong decisions and suffer for them, but their lives are not pre-determined. In The Nether World, there are no alternatives.

Robert Tressall's The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists is a "recorded . . . criticism of the present scheme of things." The reader sees a more integrated picture of the working class in this text. Patient, low-key teacher to his audience, Tressall focusses solely on workers and, to a great extent, on their work setting, using half of the chapters for this purpose. Their struggles

and interactions in this arena determine what happens in the rest of their lives. He portrays the workers in a realistic mode from a socialist perspective, revealing the ongoing everyday problems that they face. Work affects every facet of the people's lives; their celebrations, their entertainment, their personal interactions. Not the awesome, manufactured symbol of Dickens' Coketown nor the fatalistic, inevitable environment of Gissing's underworld, this setting is the result of the society not providing "the benefits of civilization--the necessaries, comforts, pleasures, and refinements of life" to all people.

Tressall's identification of Frank Owen, socialist artisan, as the protagonist allows him to present the values of socialism in the reality of the workers' world, which validates the need for dramatic social change. A painter and artistic designer, Owen is intelligent, strong, and respected, He energetically and thoughtfully addresses every issue that his fellow workers use to escape thinking about the possible alternatives to their present situation, whether it is religion or patriotism. He is sensitive to the workers' thought processes and how they arrive at and maintain their conclusions, while he persistently, interestingly, and thoroughly teaches them about the nature of their poverty. Not shown with only limited, selected friends, Owen's non-romanticized, humane concern is for all people in the working class. Presenting his explanation of socialism in understandable segments that he gives on the job when the workers have some time, he shows that money is the cause of poverty, discusses competition and the means of capitalist production (with a set of diagrams and charts that the reader also gets in the text), and explains how the socialist model will actually come into being. He never becomes cynical when he must repeatedly confront his friends, for he realizes the conditioning they have gone through. They must think that whatever is, is all that is possible.

Tressall excells in his portrayal of class struggle. As with Dickens and Gissing, he uses names to immediately denote enemies of the people: Rushton, the owner; Hunter, called Pontius Pilate and Misery, the manager; Crass, the foremen; Slyme, the hypocritical Christian. Tressall stresses the consolidation of the ruling class, providing repeated examples of how its members unite to use the working class for profit in every situation they can maneuver to their own advantage. For example, the upstanding citizens on the Mugsborough town council veto the collection of a half-penny rate tax during a depression for a general welfare fund, since "it would be better to destroy the health or even the lives of the 'dear little children' than to pauperize the parents or undermine parental responsibility."

Resolution of the problems of society will occur with a socialist state.

As Keating points out, Tressall's conclusion is that "the condition of the workers is as bad as it can be; no longer can they trust any of the existing political parties to speak for them; they must therefore openly proclaim themselves socialists and fight for revolution that is, in any case, inevitable." Because of their own disbelief in the value of anything they possess, including their minds and ideas, it will take time for the working class to see that it does not need the approval of the ruling class for action it must take to change society. Conditioned by their environment, experiences, and Christian philosophies to believe that they are powerless, workers begin to think that this is what should be, victims of the human desire to find congruency between external reality and internal thought. Forces act against people becoming politically aware. Violence occurs in the system against the people--individuals are fired, workers are sent to the poorhouse, families must take in invading boarders, fathers must kill their children to save them from starvation. People are pitted against each other, and all workers are exploited. But to see a worker fight for other workers' consciousness keeps the idea of change alive. Owen will die, but the hope continues that other persons will teach the same powerful message to the people, so that they can then take action. That is the only way society will improve.

This study of Dicken,' Eliot's, Gissing's, and Tressall's works reveals varying perspectives of the English working class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The views that these authors present about the exemplary worker range from saintly, accepting martyr; conservative Radical moralist; resigned, detached artist-artisan; to rational, socialist teacher-activist. Certainly the portrayal of class differences and of changes in and to the system strongly affects the readers' expectations of the power of the working class to identify, to initiate, and to maintain action that leads to a better society. The authors examined in this paper write during a period when there is no question as to the moral, instructive, humanizing function of literature. Their support for, submission to, or desire to modify or eliminate the class structure result from their political assumptions about the relationship of human beings to each other. Historically, this is important to recall, for literature can lead the audience into a position without the process being understood. However, the responsible, aware reader can use the tools of analyzing how knowledge is influenced, so that the role of literature in creating reality can be more clearly understood. This is necessary in order to see how the novel affects the perspective of the working class and how it changes readers' reordering of

other acquired data. Teachers can demonstrate and need to explain these political implications of literature to students, so their reading and overall learning become more fully conscious processes. Philosophers and artists recognized the power of words long ago. The masses need to realize it also.